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CHAIRPERSON GAER: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all for coming here today, this morning. My name is Felice Gaer, and I'm the Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. I'd like to welcome you all formally to the Commission's forum entitled, "Reconstructing Afghanistan: Freedom in Crisis";

This forum was organized by the Commission, which is a body unique in the United States, indeed, unique in the world. It is an American government agency, established by Congress as an independent agency to monitor the status of religious freedom around the world and to make recommendations to the President and the Congress in an effort to ensure the promotion

of religious freedom attains a key role in American foreign policy, including its human rights policy.

I am joined here today by six of my fellow Commissioners, each of whom has had a direct role in shaping the forum we are conducting today. You may be able to see their signs, but I'm going to ask them to raise their hand as I introduce each of them. Dean Michael Young, Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, Dr. Richard Land, Professor Leila Sadat, Nina Shea, Esquire, and Ambassador Shirin Tahir-Kheli.

For more information about each of the Commissioners, and indeed the Commission itself, I refer you to your information packets.

In bringing you this forum, the Commission worked closely together with George Washington University Law School, to which we extend particularly warm appreciation.

We have invited and are joined here this morning by a senior-level delegation from Afghanistan, led by the Minister of Justice, Mr. Abdul Rahim Karimi, who will help us by sharing their firsthand knowledge, and experience and views.

We have also invited senior officials from the present United States administration and the Congress, as well as many other experts, to participate in the panel discussions at this important event.

On behalf of the Commission, we welcome you, and now let me give the floor to the co-host of the forum, Dean Michael Young, who is also the Vice-Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Thank you.